

Movement and Mental Health

A case study with Manchester Mind and Moodswings

We know the positive impact movement can have in supporting our mental health and wellbeing. It is well evidenced that physical activity can help with things like dealing with stress, improving sleep, and supporting the management of depression and anxiety, all leading to an overall improvement in our wellbeing (Mind).

And, as the prevalence of mental health issues continues to rise movement is fundamental. Depression and anxiety prevalence is set to rise by 16% adding to the shift in the adult population living with a major illness from 1 in 6 in 2019 to almost 1 in 5 in 2040 (CFMH).

We know the positive impact physical activity can have, so GM Moving work to better understand how we can embed movement into healthcare systems to support people to manage and improve their mental health and wellbeing.

The centrality of movement and physical activity in the management of people's mental health makes it a key protective factor, with inactivity a risk factor in declining mental health (CFMH). But when you are struggling with your mental health, physical activity can feel like an impossible task (Mind).

There are structural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual barriers that exist which prevent people being active. There are also significant structural and environmental barriers which contribute to the difficulty in becoming more active, including:

- Poor access to safe green spaces
- Lack of affordable leisure facilities
- Physical side effects of medication
- Negative past experiences of participating in physical activity

Designing movement into our health and social care system provides a key opportunity to break down some of these barriers to movement by providing safe spaces to do so.

To understand how mental health providers are embedding movement and physical activity into their service offers, GM Moving joined Moodswings and Manchester Mind explore their service offers.

Motivation:

- Understanding the evidence base which highlights the impact of movement on mental health.
- The connection of movement to the core ethos of the provider.
- Personal experience(s) of how movement can support your mental health.

How:

- Flexible leadership and a willingness to say yes and try new things.
- Being volunteer led - creating a more welcoming environment and providing the practical support that is needed to deliver a walking group.
- A real recognition of the level of support people may need to be able to access a walking group.

Impact:

- Immediate impact: people's mood improved during the walk.
- Longer term: people are more active outside of the group as a result of their attendance.
- Wider outcomes: social connections which provide additional opportunities to be active, walking becoming part of the wider workplace culture.

Taking a deeper look

Motivation:

Despite the widely understood benefits that movement has on managing our mental health, many services are still delivered in a static way and there are barriers to providers utilising movement and physical activity within their service offer.

To support an exploration of how services can address these barriers, we wanted to understand more about the motivation behind why Moodswings and Manchester Mind use physical activity as a central part of their service offer.

For Moodswings, physical activity is inseparable from their provision ethos which is rooted in the '5 Ways to Wellbeing'.

“Our ethos, at its heart, combines a positive outlook with the threads of 5 Ways To Wellbeing, and it is acknowledged that the physical activity of ‘going for a walk’ addresses all the components of this concept. In particular, it enables our walkers to get out in the open, socialise with others, and to learn from their observations.”

Physical activity (in this case walking) is seen as a core way that staff connect to and deliver their ethos, meaning physical activity here goes beyond a ‘nice to have’ and becomes a central part of how Moodswings deliver their services.

Through spending time with both providers it is clear that the motivation also stems from a deep understanding of the evidence around how physical activity can support people’s mental health.

Staff at Manchester Mind reflected on how knowing and understanding the evidence base around movement/mental health provided additional confidence and motivation to put forward the idea of a walking group.

Evidence and data on their own can be futile – we need to be able to connect with it. This was clear when Sean explained that his interest and connection to the evidence base stemmed from personal experience of the impact that physical activity has on his own mental health.

It is difficult to advocate and deliver something without truly understanding what it feels like and why it works. Having a workforce who themselves value and have lived experience of the positive impact that moving has on the management of our mental health may support the likelihood of these initiatives to take off.

There is a clear value here in talking with and understanding staff’s relationship with physical activity as this can be a fundamental driver in engaging effectively with people using the service.

“The evidence to suggest that physical exercise has a positive impact on emotional wellbeing, is widely documented, and the interaction between the walkers provides a safe space in which feelings of isolation are reduced and a sense of companionship and togetherness is achieved.”

Wayne, Moodswings

“I suggested a walk and talk group, firstly due to researching the effects of exercise on our mental health and being aware that this is a key part of the ‘5 Ways to Wellbeing’. I also had personal experience of walking out in nature, taking in the sights and sounds. I always felt a sense of calm, less brain fog, and a quieting of the mind, I was convinced that others could also have similar experiences.”

Sean, Manchester Mind

How:

Whilst the evidence is widely documented, this type of service offer is still not the norm. Evidence of the impact of movement on mental health along with employee's personal connection to the topic are key motivators, but how is this motivation shifted into a tangible offer for people?

Visiting Manchester Mind this became clear:

- Getting the internal peer support walking group off the ground required supportive and flexible leadership. A willingness to act on people's motivations and say yes to new ideas.
- Like other peer support groups at Manchester Mind the group is volunteer-led, helping create a real peer-led approach making the space more welcoming, relatable and accessible.
- Recognition of the level of support people struggling with their mental health may need to be able to attend a walking group. There is extensive and considered communication with people prior to attending the group with written explanations and visual cues of what to expect from the space. In addition to this there are a range of different levels of support offered to people before they may feel able to attend the walking group.

“We recognised that our Peer Support groups were static, either online or room based, when thinking about how mental health can be improved, we were missing the element of being physically active. We looked at the benefits of walking and how we could incorporate this into our Peer Support model. Ensuring that people could still talk about their mental health, but do so whilst being active and out in nature”

Sean

Impact

Immediate impact:

Through our conversations with group members and volunteers and the light touch monitoring Manchester Mind collects at the end of each session it was clear that despite what people have going on when they attend the group the act of being outside, connecting with others and having ‘indirect conversations’ about their mental health supports an increase in people's mood.

Longer term impact:

Manchester Mind's quarterly evaluation of the group highlights that 83% of people who attend the group are more active as a result. This is significant given typical attendees would describe themselves as not being very active, we can see how by joining a group centred around movement supports more sustainable long-term habits beyond that group.

One group member spoke to us about how the group at Mind introduced them to the park – a green space local to them which they had never used. Since attending the group, they now come to jog round the park most weekends.

Wider impact:

Improved mood during the walks and longer-term impact on activity levels are clear indicators of the groups success in using movement to support people's mental health. However, there have also been wider (unintended) outcomes.

The group have developed a relationship with the Bike Kitchen located at the park – with some meeting and utilising the bike borrowing service to ride round the park before the group.

Within Manchester Mind there has also been the introduction of staff wellbeing walks where staff are given permission to take a few hours out from behind their desks and join volunteers and people who use the service in a walk around a chosen green space. And finally given the success of the group, new walking peer support groups are planned.

Conclusion and recommendations:

Designing movement into our mental health services can be done and the services offered by both Manchester Mind and Moodswings highlight why and how this can be done. It also shows that engaging people who may face significant barriers to being active in a service that is centred around moving works and supports people to be more active in other aspects of their lives.

When we asked what they would recommend to other mental health services the advice was clear: start with walking. Whether that is a walking group or using walking within 1-1 sessions.

- Understand the evidence for why movement supports our mental health.
- Engage staff around their relationship with movement, encourage and give permission for staff to move during their working day.
- Flexibility within leadership teams to try something new.

- Build movement into a central part of your ethos.